

# Issues Associated with Nonformal Environmental Educator Certification

A Project of The  
Environmental Education and Training Partnership

**Prepared by  
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# Executive Summary

The Third Environmental Education and Training Partnership (EETAP3) views certification programs as an important effort with the potential to grow and significantly influence the field. In 2008, EETAP3 developed and published a *Request for Proposals to Examine Issues Related to Certification in Environmental Education*. The Environmental Education Association of Oregon (EEAO) responded to the RFP and was subsequently awarded a contract to implement the study. This report presents the results of EEAO's work.

In many fields, some method for certifying practitioners is considered important or even essential in order to establish these practitioners' qualifications. A certification process can identify the most important knowledge and skills that a practitioner should possess, establish procedures for evaluating these knowledge and skills, to some extent control entry into the field so that unqualified persons are excluded, and even provide for differential rewards on the basis of certification or non-certification.

A certification process will include a standardized body of professional knowledge and skills; a method for assessment of the knowledge and skills; and procedures and processes for gaining the knowledge and skills, such as prescribed academic coursework, on-the-job training and life experiences, or informal learning and self-directed study. While any true certification program will possess all three components in some measure, certification programs will vary in effectiveness based on the quality and rigor of one or more of the components.

The research reported in this document was designed to gauge the interest among nonformal environmental educators, their employers, and college/university trainers in certification, the various dimensions of value which they ascribe to certification, and their thoughts about how it might best be implemented. The research was guided by the following questions:

- What value do nonformal environmental education practitioners place on certification? What is the likelihood that they will seek certification? Why or why not?
- What is the level of support for developing and implementing certification programs for non-formal environmental educators?
- How much importance would employers place on certification in making hiring decisions if a substantial pool of certified environmental educators was available? What type of certification program would they be more or less likely to support? Why?
- What interest do colleges and universities have in developing courses that would enhance the competency of nonformal environmental educators to help those educators meet state environmental educator certification program requirements?

The study used a single questionnaire with multiple sections targeted to each of four populations of respondents:

- Nonformal Environmental Education Practitioners (members of the North American Association for Environmental Education (NAAEE), the National Association for Interpretation (NAI) Environmental Education section, and others)

- NAAEE affiliate liaisons representing their state environmental education association
- Employers of Nonformal Environmental Educators (park managers, nature and environmental education center directors, outdoor education and adventure programs managers, directors of environmental organizations with education programs)
- Colleges and university faculty

The questionnaires included both scaled (closed-ended) and open-ended questions. A total of 787 persons responded. Specific sections of the survey were designed for targeted populations; consequently not every respondent answered every question. The online questionnaires were administered via SurveyMonkey, a web-based tool designed for collecting responses to questions with a variety of formats.

The research produced the following findings with regard to the guiding questions designed to gauge the level of interest and various dimensions of value placed on certification:

- A majority of respondents support certification, although this support varies and seems stronger among certified practitioners.
- Support for certification is inconsistent among employers of nonformal environmental educators and would depend on such variables as cost, time, and perceived return on investment.
- Although interest is high, several barriers limit the development of certification programs at colleges and universities, including cost and lack of faculty resources.

The report identifies six recommendations based on the findings regarding the level of interest and value placed on certification. For each of the six recommendations, detailed suggestions are included for specific stakeholder groups uniquely positioned to help advance the development and implementation of environmental educator certification programs. The stakeholder groups include Environmental Education and Training Partnership (EETAP), North American Association for Environmental Education (NAAEE), NAAEE Affiliates and Affiliates Steering Committee, and representatives of colleges and universities. The six recommendations for the development of state environmental educator certification programs are:

Recommendation #1: Evaluate the effectiveness and impact of existing environmental educator certification programs.

Recommendation #2: Continue and increase dialogue within the field regarding certification.

Recommendation #3: Continue developing state certification programs that meet the accreditation requirements established by the North American Association for Environmental Education.

Recommendation #4: Increase capacity building efforts of state environmental education associations and higher education institutions.

Recommendation #5: Increase dialogue with nonformal environmental education supervisors and employers.

Recommendation #6: Increase awareness and knowledge about environmental education among college and university faculty members and administrators. Encourage college/university action steps as a result of interest in certification for non-formal environmental educators.

In addition to the six specific recommendations and stakeholder suggestions, the data suggest that the development and implementation of certification programs should be considered in the larger and more strategic context of state capacity building. Supporting efforts that integrate three separate EETAP activities (state capacity building, supporting state certification programs, and working with higher education institutions) will help coalesce resources and maximize the impact, success and sustainability of any one activity. The recommendations provide insight into the critical need for continued focus on capacity building to ensure progress toward the establishment of state environmental educator certification programs.